

The Color of Authority

Roy San Filippo

October 1, 2004

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One of the most compelling aspects of anarchism is its holistic approach to human freedom. “We are opposed to all forms of domination and oppression” is a phrase that appears almost universally in every statement of purpose and political statement of anarchist collectives and projects. This reflects anarchism’s total rejection of all forms of oppression and its belief that no one oppression is the base or “primary oppression” upon which all other oppressions rest. Racism or sexism could thrive in a socialist society, and eradicating racism or sexism by no means guarantees the eradication of capitalism or the state. Oppressions, as the saying goes, are relatively autonomous. This is an important insight that developed out of a critique of the crude class reductionism of neo-Marxism and was often used as an excuse by white, male leftists to not take the seriously the struggles for racial justice, women’s liberation, and queer liberation. However, when pressed to develop this analysis further, anarchism falls silent. Beyond recognizing this “relative autonomy” (and thus the “relative” interconnectedness of various oppressions), anarchism has failed to articulate precisely how these oppressions interconnect in a way that is useful for organizers. Predictably, this has hampered the capacity for anarchists to effectively develop the analysis of society that is needed to develop strategies for revolution.

Moral Equivalency, Strategic Hierarchy

For revolutionaries, it is not simply enough to oppose all forms of authority and oppression; we need a plan for destroying them. If we are to transform society, we must understand precisely how forms of authority are related and determine where the weak points are so we can develop effective strategies. An important step in developing a strategy is the recognition that while oppressions are morally equivalent, strategically they are not. Many organizers implicitly accept this notion in practice—at least when it comes to systems of authority other than race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Anarchists who do community organizing on a regular basis know the importance of working with religious institutions—churches, mosques, and synagogues—in any organizing effort. They do this despite anarchism’s opposition to religious forms of authority. To use just one example, in the immediate aftermath of September 11th, anarchists from across the country, clad in their black “No Gods, No Masters” t-shirts, began working closely with Muslim groups and mosques in their cities in order to assist Arab and Muslim communities with self-defense efforts. Clearly this was the correct thing to do and consciously or not, reflected an assessment by anarchists that defending Muslims from attacks by racists and the state takes a strategic priority over anarchism’s (largely philosophical and ideological) opposition to forms religious authority.

A second important step in developing a strategy is the recognition that oppressions connect in ways particular to the historical context and social forces in which they develop. The relationships between race, class, and gender in one country are likely to be quite different than it is in another, and therefore the strategies for destroying them will also be different. The U.S.’s rather unique history of racial slavery and segregation have made white supremacy central to the functioning of America in a way it hasn’t in others societies. Activists must understand the ways that the particular historical experiences of the United States wove race and class together that makes fighting white supremacy central to any revolutionary project. In other words, those who wish to fight against all forms of authoritarianism must understand one crucial fact of American politics—in America authority is colored white.

The White Shadow

In the United States, one cannot escape the importance of race. Anyone familiar with the literature of critical race theory already knows this basic truth: that race is a social construct with no biological basis. Though biologically race is “fiction,” it is still a social reality. Race is a signifier of social, legal, economic, and political value (or lack thereof) in America. White supremacy casts a long shadow over American society and colors more than just the consciousness of white folks. It has institutionalized white privilege in political institutions, the courts, schools, and labor unions to name just a few. The state not only legitimates these privileges, it also actively enforces them in the back rooms, through public policy, and in the frontlines, through police, prisons, and jails. American society grants real and significant material and psychological benefits to those defined as “white.”

One of the affects of these benefits has been that the white working class has identified its interests with the white ruling class and not with the rest of the working class; this has effectively driven a wedge within the working class—a fact illustrated every time a real estate agent “steers” a Black family to a Black neighborhood and every time a bus driver made Black folks sit in the back of the bus. In order to seriously challenge the existing system, this wedge must be removed. A successful, anti-authoritarian revolution in American can be engendered by a revolutionary crisis in the institutions of white supremacy. As happened during Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement, attacks against institutions of white supremacy generated such a crisis and opened up political space for movements to attack not only racial oppression, but also all forms of domination. In the case of Reconstruction, the United States was brought to the brink of a social revolution, the first wave of feminism emerged from the abolitionist struggles, and queer liberation, AIM and countless other struggles for freedom emerged on the heels of the Civil Rights movement. The lesson learned here should be clear: a strategic orientation to the destruction of white supremacy does NOT violate the anarchist opposition to all forms of oppression, rather it fulfills the potential of their anti-authoritarian vision.

White Abolitionism as a Strategy for Revolution

When Donovan Jackson, a Black youth, was brutally beaten by a white police officer in Inglewood, California last summer, the incident was caught on videotape by Mitchell Crooks, who is white. A revealing twist to this incident lies in the fact that the first two people arrested in connection with this incident were Jackson, the Black victim, and Crooks, the white man whose videotape exposed the police brutality. In this moment we see enforcement of the color line by the state twice: first in the all too common form of police abuse in the Black community and secondly in the form of the harsh retribution against the person who exposed one instance of that abuse. Crooks’s act was an instance of race treason—when a white person violated an unspoken rule of whiteness by actively opposing the state’s attempt to enforce the color line, a transgression of the norms of whiteness that the state took so seriously that Crooks was promptly incarcerated. Why are such acts of race treason so threatening? Because the enforcement of the color line is predicated on the belief that the state can determine who is a friend and who is an enemy by the color of their skin. By attacking the institutions of white supremacy and flagrantly violating the norms of whiteness, the state would no longer be able use white skin as reliable determiner of

who is a friend and who is a foe to the existing society, undermining the separate deal that the white working class struck with capital.

Though white supremacy has driven a wedge within the American working class, these social relationships are neither natural, nor inevitable. It is the current result of historical contestations for power. Simply put—the state and capital have been more successful at institutionalizing white supremacy than we have been in fighting it. The task ahead is to reverse that trend. As activists, agitators, and revolutionaries, we needn't abandon our anti-authoritarian vision. However, strategies for realizing that vision need to be informed by an understanding of the intersection of oppressions that have resulted from this society's particular historical development. In the United States, focusing on white supremacy does more to fight all forms of oppression than by "fighting" them all simultaneously. When we refuse to strategically prioritize our political work in response to historical and structural conditions, we lose the struggle.

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Retrieved on March 14, 2019 from web.archive.org
Roy San Filippo is the editor of *A New World in Our Hearts: Eight Years of Writing from the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation* (AK Press).

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